

ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

**Basic substantial teaching on what
Orthodox Christians believe**



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THE SAINTS

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THE SAINTS

The Saints are a wonderful lot of people. They are very much worth getting to know. I have spent many years drawing close to them, not only by reading what they have to tell us but by standing before Christ and discovering how much they are 'alive in him'.

The saints are the true disciples and friends of Jesus. Friendship does not mean simply getting on well together. Complete union exists between Christ and the Saints. They have one life because Christ is Life and the saints share in him, the communion of saints in the communion of the Trinity.

The Son of God created all things good; he made human beings that they may be filled with his goodness. He has now made them not only in his image but in his likeness - Christlike.

When he took flesh, lived among us, died and rose again Christ brought about a change in the human condition - he made it perfectly obedient to God.

In doing this Christ took away all darkness, sin and death. We may now have his life in us, and we can live in intimate union with him. This intimate union results in transforming holiness.

Holiness is an amazing quality of life. Holiness is the overwhelming presence of Jesus in someone. It has a drawing power; it attracts us in such a way that we instinctively feel we want to be made holy also. Holiness makes us want to seek the truth like nothing else does.

We must always seek the truth. The world is full of

untruth. We are told so many lies. There are layers of untruth inside all of us. We so easily become confused. Truth is so precious. We have to be determined to find it. We have to shed lies like old skins.

Meeting a holy person is like a breath of fresh air. A saint does not point to himself but to Jesus. Others, he will tell us, will teach us about life in Christ. Saints are always modest; they will not tell you about themselves – unless perhaps under extreme pressure from the needs of love.

The most exciting thing in the world to discover is that there is a whole tradition of saints in every country, in every century, from the time of Jesus right up to the present day. We call this the Living Tradition of holiness.

This discovery might be likened to the discovery of a single jewel with a thousand facets, each different, each shining with the Light and the Glory of God. Each facet is a person who has allowed the Son of God to do what he wanted to do for them: to possess them completely and surround the Father with their ineffable glory

I discovered the Living Tradition almost 50 years ago when I met Fr Sophrony in his new monastery at Tolleshunt Knights in Essex, and he told me about his spiritual father, St Silouan. Since then I have tried to get as close as I can to the saints. This takes time but that does not matter. For this discovery is the fulfilment of every human aspiration, the very purpose of time, existence and being. One cannot wish to find anything greater.

Jesus provides each one of us with 'entry points' into the truth. As a student I found myself stuck in theologies which did not offer a way forward. This was because they

were essentially mental constructs which only fell apart. The discovery of a saint and the Living Tradition of the saints was my entry point. It got me praying and repenting with an earnestness that I never had before. It got me surrendering myself on a daily basis to the will of God. God for his part, was able to get working on me.

With time and perseverance, I got a sense that God was cleansing my heart and that he was changing me on the inside. I got the undeniable sense that 'this was working'.

With a lot more time and a lot more perseverance, I was able to become still before God. The blessing of a cleansed heart and mind is incalculable. That stillness increases in an extraordinary fashion.

Christ showed me that I had to stop trying to work out the truth with my head, and stop trying to change things and improve everything. In short, stop trying to establish myself as the arbiter of truth.

Holiness draws us because it comes from someone. It shows us that truth is a person.

Truth is someone you can welcome and embrace. Truth communicates himself when we are prepared to listen and be still.

Truth sets us free.

Truth is active. It has energy.

Christ himself is the truth that sets us free. Christ himself radiates the energy that acts upon us.

He shines as Light.

He reveals himself to be the Son of God so that we may walk in the truth, and rejoice in the light.

The proof that Christ is both Light and Truth is the radiance of Saints. They have become light because they were obedient to his commandments. His Light and Truth shines from them.

Holiness and obedience are inseparable. There is no holiness without it. Obedience without holiness is not possible, and is sterile.

Christ shows himself as truth not only in the saints, but the mind of Christ is also revealed in the church

'There is one body and one Spirit —just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all'.

This is the truth. The tangle of differing theologies drops away, as do the claims of different churches.

This is reflected in the integrity of the Living Tradition. This tradition is not just a 'spiritual' one, it is a tradition of faith and practice, built around the liturgy, with one bishop at one altar in each place.

The characteristic of this tradition is its wholeness.

The church is a divine and human communion. It can only ever be one.

This union is necessarily visible. The church has a visible continuity with the apostles. To the early church any break from the apostles was unthinkable. An invisible union which is separate from the visible church has little meaning.

To be separate from the apostolic church, with its apostolic faith and life, prayer and worship, should be

unthinkable. Who wants a different theology, a different structure, a different tradition?

Paul said 'we have the mind of Christ'. Who would want a different mind or a different interpretation?

To be separate from the visible church manifests ultimately a lack of love - even though the visible church also has manifested a lack of love on many occasions.

The scriptures cannot be rightly interpreted apart from the life of the church. They express the experience of the apostolic church. They cannot be interpreted meaningfully apart from those who have shown themselves to be fully obedient to it.

Apostolic ministry has continued in the church through the bishops who followed after them.

Apostolic faith has continued in the common 'rule of faith'. This rule was further set out in the creeds; and in turn helped the bishops determine the canon of scripture.

The ultimate gift in all these things is that divine-human life which is Christ's own gift of himself to the church.

This life of Christ is neither an ideal nor is it abstract. It is made manifest in the overcoming of all the forces of death; these exist in us as a result of the many activities of the self to make a separate existence apart from God. The Saints have done their part in allowing Christ to overcome all this in themselves

This is why the church, ever since the days of the Apostles, has had to stand in the conflict with the 'mind of the flesh'.

We do not understand Christ unless we recognise this

divine-human life which he has given to the church. We do not understand the church unless we recognise what Christ has done in our corporate humanity.

The first Christians felt the full impact of the Risen Christ upon their humanity. This made them eager to gather together as one, as the apostolic church, to receive Christ himself both as the Living Word of God and in the Eucharist. This made them eager to stand in Christ and pray in his Light and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The fundamental purpose of these activities is to receive Christ's divine life into our lives. Every activity of the church must always be to receive his transforming holiness as he rescues us from death and makes us into Risen Ones, alive in the Risen One. Christ's life is the life of all. The only tragedy is not to be a Saint.

God raised up those who could testify to this all embracing life in his Kingdom. First there are the martyrs. These have laid down their lives for Christ 'to obtain Christ and be found in him', in every century, in every place, not least in our times.

God raised up from the very beginning ascetics and virgins. They have borne testimony to the mystery of growth in holiness, in every century, in every place, and also not least in our times.

This growth has borne fruit in holy living, in every country, in every continent, everywhere where the church has ever been.

When the empire stopped persecuting Christians, scores of radical experiments in communal Christian living in holiness became evident in many places.

St Basil himself lived these aspirations, encouraged, and directed them, all the while perfecting the doctrinal expression of faith in the Trinity. St Gregory of Nazianzen assisted him in this task. So did St Gregory Nyssa. He established sound scriptural and doctrinal foundations of the life of prayer.

St Athanasius did likewise. He also, in writing the 'Life of Antony', gave the growing monastic movement its most powerful tool.

St Antony pioneered the life of holiness, and people came to him from everywhere. Through the writing of Athanasius, his life touched thousands through both East and West.

The Desert Fathers also lived this life. Their wisdom, expressed in sayings by the thousand, have impacted Christians by the tens of thousands, in every time, in every century, in every place, to this day.

Evagrius was the first to give a coherent written account of the teaching of the Desert Fathers. His writings on asceticism and prayer became basic documents for generation after generation of monks.

St Isaiah, St Barsanuphius and St John, followed by St Dorotheos, continued the life of the Desert Fathers in Gaza. The 'Questions and Answers' of Barsanuphius and John give us intimate details of their lives and there is a wealth of wisdom in their teaching. St Dositheos showed that faithfulness to the teaching of these Fathers could result in a truly sanctified life after a relatively short time.

Macarius, the author of some 50 Spiritual Homilies, understood how the spiritual aspirations of Jews and Greeks, of Egyptians and Syrians, were united in Christ

and form but one way of holiness. This is despite different languages, different concepts, different words and different emphases.

Macarius also showed that the life of prayer, contemplation and the liturgical worship of the church belong together.

The Desert Fathers restored effective discipleship in the church.

Teaching by way of example and experience, passed from father to disciple, and from him to the next disciple. No one can seriously expect to by-pass this process. There is just too much to learn and just too many problems to get through.

The testimony of the Desert Fathers was soon fed into the mainstream of Church life. Holiness is not only for monks but for everyone. Holiness is not confined to the desert but open to those who live in the world.

Christians in the world have always gone to the Fathers among the saints for advice on Christian living. The issue is common to all Christians: learning how to live free from the self and the influence of the world. Some leaders of the church have been outstanding examples of holiness. St John Chrysostom was one of them.

The Byzantines understood that the Kingdom of God was in their midst because of holy men and women. They believed that holiness should impinge on every nook and cranny of society.

Saints stand in the spiritual conflict of their time. St Simeon Stylites, St John Climacus, and St Isaac the Syrian, are outstanding examples of such men of prayer,

from the fifth to the ninth centuries.

Their teaching also had a prophetic role. This sometimes created tension with institutional leaders.

St Maximus the Confessor showed that when doctrine and spirituality are united, spirituality becomes prophetic theology. St John the Almsgiver gave away the entire wealth of the Patriarchate of Alexandria as a prophetic testimony to the Kingdom in the church.

Regrettably history has not always followed theology. The bishops who sat in the Great Councils to preserve the unity of holiness were not altogether successful in their efforts. The churches in the East split.

Due to disruption by war in Armenia, Persia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as in Italy, the Balkans and Romania, the Living Tradition was sometimes obscured. But it was often kept secure in hidden places.

Sometimes church life has sunk low. Sometimes even monastic life sinks low. Then sometimes faithful hermits, such as those on Mt Sinai, have been able to bring about a new awakening of life and light for all. Several lonely and remote mountain tops were inhabited by others.

St Simeon the New Theologian was another person of great holiness when life in the church had apparently sunk to a low ebb.

Of outstanding significance was Mount Athos. Many great saints have lived there; among them were St Gregory of Sinai and St Gregory Palamas.

Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania received the tradition from the Byzantines. The Living Tradition, hidden in the

Carpathian Mountains of Romania, seems to have survived remarkably well from early days.

The Russians received their tradition from the Slavs. But they carried the tradition forward for the next thousand years in a wholly magnificent way.

They took to the Gospel with great fervour. They identified with Christ who came in humility, poverty and suffering. They lived in the light and joy of the Resurrection. The Russians connected strongly with Athos.

St Sergius and St Nilus are among many hundreds whose lives of prayer were hidden in the forests, and wastes of the farthest north and east. Their names and their numbers are beyond counting. One consequence was a remarkable evangelism of peoples.

Both in Romania and Russia we can follow the tradition from father to disciple, from disciple to disciple, and so on – just as it continued on Mt Athos, on Mt Sinai, and many other places in the East.

When the church in Russia was taken over by the state, God raised up those who could carry on the tradition. The work of St Paisius Velichovsky gave birth to saints in abundance. As a new breed of elders, they kept the tradition received from Athos and cherished in Romania, alive in Russia. They were able to pass on their wisdom to the monasteries which survived.

Seraphim of Sarov is one of the brightest lights of holiness of this period. At the monastery of Optino we find a remarkable succession of spiritual elders, strongly reminiscent of the Desert Fathers themselves.

The gracious words of many Spirit-filled men were gathered up with time. The Greeks produced a 'Philocalia' of the writings of the saints. The Romanians did the same, and so did the Russians from various other Fathers. This greatly helped in the renewal of tradition from generation to generation. This renewal is still being fanned by God today in the revival of holiness in our times.

Russia has produced martyrs and confessors in unparalleled abundance. Romania continues to produce saints of the highest order, and so does Mount Athos and Greece.

The Living Tradition also continues in Serbia, Egypt, Syria and Ethiopia.

The Living Tradition has flowed into the West in modern times, with momentous effect.

With St Silouan and Fr Sophrony we see the tradition come from Russia, via Mt Athos, to the West and, often, through the West to the rest of the world. St Silouan is a saint of the twentieth century who speaks prophetically to everyone.

The Living Tradition of the Desert Fathers came to the West through St Martin and St John Cassian. At a time when the church in the West was taking over control of the affairs in the world, St Benedict provided a strong witness to life in the Kingdom. His witness has remained strong right to the present day.

Monastic life from the East took vigorous root in the British Isles, in Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, but above all in Ireland, where it was particularly suitable to the culture. After the example of St Patrick, the Irish, (in the

persons of St Columba, St Aidan, St Cuthbert, and St Columbanus among others), travelled everywhere, not only in the British Isles but throughout Europe. The Franks supported the monastic life to an amazing degree.

From the fourth to eighth centuries the monastic life was the spearhead of evangelism throughout Europe. There were also remarkable bishops.

If the Irish demonstrated this with unparalleled vigour, it was no less true of the Anglo-Saxons. The numbers of monastic foundations is almost unbelievable.

In addition Boniface and many others, crossed the Channel to evangelise far and wide across Northern Europe.

Warfare is always severely destructive. The invasion of England by the Danes in the 9C was such that it appears every monastery in England was destroyed. The likelihood is that some monastics survived, but we don't know about it. But what happened in England brings home to us what has happened in other countries. We have to be extremely thankful to God that his church has survived and with it the monastic life

In the West the papacy continued its attempts to organise and control everything in isolation from the other Patriarchs; it was just the time when the church in the West was facing an explosion of human energies. The coming of scholasticism in particular tended to push the Living Tradition into the margins. Contemplation was left to quiet and hidden monasteries and convents.

The effect of all this had severe consequences for relationship with the churches in the East. Brothers

became strangers.

However a return to the Tradition of the Desert Fathers inspired St Romuald, St Peter Damien, St John Gualbert, and St Bruno, founder of the Carthusians.

St Bernard and the Cistercians, by insisting on simplicity in all things in a communal setting, captured the hearts and minds of thousands in their day.

There are some outstanding saints in the West after the twelfth century. However they do not appear 'as a golden chain' in the same way that those in the East do. It is noticeable that Bernard, Francis, Catherine of Siena, Teresa and John of the Cross, each had to fashion his or her own mode of discourse. Each one shone as an individual 'great light', splendid in their particular luminosity.

The church of the West was too rich, too powerful, too authoritarian, and too accepting of intolerable abuses. It lost respect. Many deserted the church.

St Francis took to the Gospel with an outstanding simplicity and directness. There have been few as radical as he was. He was first and foremost a person of prayer and contemplation; from this flowed his evangelism.

The women were not to be outdone. First there was St Clare. She was truly another St Francis.

After St Clare, many strong determined women were found in the church who were not afraid of the heart and found the ability to express this when required to do so. God spoke to these women in vision, in prophecy and power. St Hildegard, St Mechtild, St Beatrice and others

wrote theology in a new language, not merely in the vernacular, but in picture language. This challenged the male 'professionals' radically

Women also took on the world. St Bridget and St Catherine rebuked kings and popes for their worldly behaviour.

Another woman arose who almost single-handedly restored the place of poverty and prayer to the church in her time. St Teresa of Avila had St John of the Cross to help her. She was the foundress of the Discalced Carmelites . She helped St John to share his wealth of experience in the ways of God.

There were many saints given to prayer and evangelism in the renewal in Catholic Europe. Spain, Italy and France all produced outstanding saints. I mention here only for example St Catherine of Genoa and St John Vianney; the latter was remarkable for his humility, poverty of spirit and prayer

At the end of the nineteenth century came St Therese of Lisieux. For a girl so young to enter the spiritual marriage is quite astonishing. That she did so with such simplicity, such strong love, in such an unaffected way, makes her testimony of inestimable value to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

There are many more saints than we have been able to indicate. There are thousands known to the different churches. Thousands more are unknown to historical records.

There are saints alive on earth to-day if for no other reason than that God never ceases to be active. We shall only know who they are in a few years time.

There are many more whose lives of union and contemplation hold the world up to God. They live in our cities, our towns, and remote places

I have selected here those saints who have been of help to someone living in Britain today. If I had lived elsewhere the selection would have been different.

The Saints are our teachers. The Saints trusted the Father's revelation of his Son Jesus completely. They were willing to recognise the truth when Jesus spoke about the human heart and to act upon it. They were willing to trust what he had done in the Cross and the Resurrection and they received the Holy Spirit whom the Risen Christ sends. They believed that he could deliver them from the death inflicted by the self. They believed he could save them and heal them with his divine life. They believed he would enable them to participate in his new creation, and be made like him in all respects. This gift, known as divinisation, is not only for the life to come but, for those who can receive it in this world also.

The Saints proved that Jesus was right, that he was who he said he was; and that he had the power to deliver what he said he would deliver. In giving their hearts to Christ and asking him to pour the Holy Spirit into them, they found that the Spirit made their hearts profoundly still and capable of pure prayer. Cleansed and obedient, they discovered that human beings can look to God, and contemplate him. They saw the divine light, they beheld the divine truth. They received the divine life so completely, that, always resting in the Father's love, they enjoyed unending transformation in that love.

The Saints are our prophets. They point to the truth and

they point out the way.

They reveal Jesus to us. They shine with his life. They show forth his power.

The Saints are living symbols in a world that has lost the meaning of symbols. They point to what is central, to what abides, and does not change.

The saints have the mind of Christ.

The Saints reveal that there is only one way of holiness. Yet each one of them is unique and Christ shines from a thousand different faces.

God did not reveal Jesus and afterwards make second-rate copies. He did not make a saint and then produce a thousand clones. In each culture, in each different generation, he brings forth new manifestation of himself, each a unique and distinct person.

The saints stand together in a unity, in a communion of holiness. They testify to one Kingdom where the reign of self, of death and of evil has been overcome. The saints live in the Kingdom untainted by death.

The way of holiness is the very heart of God's work in the world.

The way of holiness is the manifestation of God's Kingdom. It is the life God promises, his own life, which he gives to the church.

The purpose of the church is to manifest this holiness to the world. The greatest tragedy for any one is not to be a saint.

Christians call Jesus 'Lord', but mean very different things. They seek to obey him, but do very different

things. They may talk of the 'church', of 'scripture', they may speak of 'salvation', 'faith', 'sacraments', 'sanctification', but mean quite different things.

Some see this as a way of unity. But this cannot be so where there are major departures from the Living Tradition

There are thousands of books but let us not accept anyone's theology until we know it accords with the saints. This will require rigour in evaluating the meaning of words and of the people who use them. The scriptures tell us to test everything. We should do so.

Our supreme call is to love one another.

The situation of Christians in the world has changed. Today the people of the world are thrown together as never before in the cause of peace, justice and survival. We meet each other everywhere. There is no escape. There is no escape from facing up to Christ's call to love.

But for the most part Christians are still fighting one another, if not with bullets at least with words. We may disagree at times with one another; but we are still not to fight rather love one another. There are many who have not yet understood this.

We tend to define ourselves over against each other. Before Christ it is meaningless to do so.

Christ is drawing every man, woman and child to himself. He is drawing all through the actual circumstances of our lives, to himself.

It does not matter, in one sense, who we are, where we are, whether we are in a church or not: he finds us where we are and will take us forward. We may be Orthodox,

we may be Catholic, we may be Protestant, or not a believer at all: Christ is working on us wherever we are.

Christians are called to recognize the work of Christ in each other and in the world. Then we shall stop fighting and let him take us forward.

He leads us to recognise the mystery of his divine human life in the church and the mystery of his divine life in the Eucharist.

Then we shall be near a point where the apostolic faith and love can be recognised and celebrated once more in unity.

Even now, we all meet, so to speak, at an invisible table.

We come to this table, each as we are, in whatever Christian integrity we have.

We face one other in a mystery.

We share words, and the Word also is somehow, mysteriously, present.

We share truth with one another, and the Bread of Life is mysteriously present.

We try to love one other, and somehow, mysteriously, we drink the Cup of Immortality.

May the Lord forgive me where I have failed to see the truth. May Jesus always show you more of himself.

***'For those who do the will of God
the gate is opened and the way is well-trod,
the spring is flowing and gives drink to the
thirsty,
the table is laid and the marriage-feast
prepared.
The fatted ox is slain and the 'cup of
salvation' mixed;
The banquet is prepared, the bridegroom has
arrived to take his place;
The apostles have issued the invitations and
so many are called:
Elect, prepare yourselves!'***

Aphrahat

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